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Published in:
Journal of the Philosophy of History

DOI:
[10.1163/18722636-12341369](https://doi.org/10.1163/18722636-12341369)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2017

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Ankersmit, F., & Menezes, J. (2017). Historical Experience Interrogated: A Conversation. *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, 11(2), 247-273. <https://doi.org/10.1163/18722636-12341369>

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Interview



Historical Experience Interrogated: A Conversation

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Abstract

In this interview, Jonathan Menezes asks Frank Ankersmit about various aspects of his theory of historical experience, focusing especially on his main book on the subject, *Sublime Historical Experience* (2005), but also on other writings in which he accounted for historical experience, like *History and Topology* (1994) and *Meaning, Truth and Reference in Historical Representation* (2012). The subjects addressed in the conversation include some of the existent criticism and polemic about this ‘experiential’ part of Ankersmit’s work; a new analysis of the relationship between Huizinga’s ‘historical sensation’ and Ankersmit’s ‘historical experience’; Ankersmit’s criticism of and attempt to go beyond Rorty and the so-called ‘linguistic transcendentalism’; and Ankersmit’s point of view on the connection between historical experience and the German historicist tradition.

* Acknowledgements: I would like to thank Alice Joan Kaiser and Stefan Kürle for revising the language, and the two anonymous reviewers for their useful and generous thoughts on the content of this interview. *Gracias!*

Keywords

historical experience – historical sensation – Huizinga – transcendentalism – Rorty – Romanticism – moods and feelings – historicism

Introduction

Historical experience, as much as memory, became a ‘hot’ subject of the discussions in the theory and philosophy of history during the last decade or so. The most important and debated book on the subject probably was (and still is) Frank Ankersmit’s *Sublime Historical Experience* (SHE) of 2005. This might be the most excentric book he has ever written; it is surely also his most personal, dark, moving and introspective book (with some touches of an autobiography), where in which we see his romantic side speaking out loud and longing for a reconnection with the ‘lost paradise’ of the past. As a result, he puzzled many with all the conversation about being in touch with or reviving the past by suspending the constraints of language or, in the terms he much preferred, by escaping from ‘the prisonhouse of language’. Some have even said that the Ankersmit of SHE completely lost his way in the historical discipline,¹ since he apparently abandoned the consolidated realm of language in favor of the ‘enchanted’ one of experience. His longstanding concern with the philosophical topics of *meaning*, *truth* and *reference* in historical representation, as stated in his book of 2012, might stand as one counter-example to readings of this sort.²

I suspect then that part of the criticism and misgiving that has been raised on Ankersmit’s notion of historical experience is based, on the one hand, on the somewhat lackadaisical attitude of his critics towards the author’s declaration of intentions and purposes in the preface and the introduction of SHE. It is my contention that if one fails to understand the core of what he is proposing in the book’s opening pages, one will probably fail to grasp the whole picture. On the other hand, they are based in the book’s own weaknesses and lack of clarity regarding some of its most important features – like, for instance, the absence of further explanations about the theoretical interplay between historical experience and Huizinga’s ‘historical sensation’, which, by the way, is the subject of my first question to Ankersmit in this interview. Therefore, I choose

1 See: Peter P. Icke, *Frank Ankersmit’s Lost Historical Cause: The Journey from Language to Experience*, (London & New York: Routledge, 2012).

2 See: Frank Ankersmit, *Meaning, Truth and Reference in Historical Representation*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 2012).

to dedicate all the other questions presented here to this fascinating and intriguing topic of historical experience. The conversation focuses on some of the existent criticism and polemic about this 'experiential' part of Ankersmit's work as well as a new analysis of the relationship between Huizinga's 'historical sensation' and Ankersmit's 'historical experience'. One will probably note that Ankersmit's criticism of and attempt to go beyond Rorty and the so-called 'linguistic transcendentalism' is one of the recurrent topics. The reader will also find useful information about the differences between the English and the Dutch versions of *SHE*. Finally, Ankersmit explains his point of view on the connection between historical experience and the German historicist tradition.

We (speaking on behalf of Ankersmit and myself) believe that the problems raised by this conversation, followed by further explanations with respect to these problems, may contribute to a clarification of many of the mysteries still surrounding historical experience in the current state of play of theory and philosophy of history.

Menezes

Let's start with one of the most important inspirations for your account of historical experience, in my opinion, the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga. One of Peter Icke's critiques of *Sublime Historical Experience* (*SHE*), found in his book *Frank Ankersmit's Lost Historical Cause*, is that your exchange of Huizinga's historical sensation for historical experience is a product of a bad interpretation of Huizinga's notion, since by sensation (I quote Icke): 'he [Huizinga (J.M.)] meant experience in the Kantian sense of *sensation/intuition plus concepts = experience*, and thus doesn't have a decontextualized/subjectless notion of it at all'. Then he concludes that 'Huizinga has a notion of experience and not sensation, whereas Ankersmit has a notion of sensation but calls it experience'.³ However, he did not go through the trouble of discussing any of Huizinga's writings in his book to prove (or improve) his argument, thus giving rise to the suspicion that he took as his guide a shallow, commonsensical view of what sensation might have meant to Huizinga, a view that is mainly provoked by his desire to disagree with you. Icke's ill-considered characterization of Huizinga's notion of historical sensation is all the more surprising since you discussed it at length in your book. I know you already dealt with this in *SHE*, but allow me to ask you specifically: Why, and in which sense, can Huizinga's historical sensation be related to your historical experience?

³ Peter P. Icke, *Frank Ankersmit's*, 173n.

Ankersmit

The question you asked me does, in fact, add an extra dimension to it that I now regret not to have discussed in the book on sublime historical experience. As you surmised yourself already, what Icke wrote on Huizinga's conception of historical sensations or experience is complete nonsense. The term historical sensation (*'historische sensatie'* in Dutch), as used by Huizinga refers to the literary movement of the so-called '*Tachtigers*' (which is Dutch for the movement of the 1880s. One of the main theoreticians of this movement was Karel Johan Lodewijk Alberdingk Thijm (1864–1952) whose pseudonym was Lodewijk van Deysse). Just as in France at the same time, a number of Dutch poets and novelists in the 1880s began to have their doubts about the literary realism or naturalism of the preceding decades. But whereas the French (think, for example, of Mallarmé) turned toward symbolism, the movement of the 1880s moved in exactly the opposite direction. Symbolism was a movement away from reality and towards abstraction or, to put it differently, it found in language a new reality superseding what we normally understand by that word. (Much is to be said, by the way, in favour of regarding French deconstructivism, as exemplified by Derrida, as symbolism's philosophical counterpart.)

Lodewijk van Deysse and the movement of the 1880s advocated, as opposed to symbolism, the subjection of language to experience and to how the world presents itself to us, hence, as undistorted by language and by how experience is codified by language. In symbolism, language is the victor in the struggle between language and reality (and/or experience), whereas it is the vanquished party in the movement of the 1880s. As a result, the distrust of language made the poets and the novelists of the 1880s experiment with language and invent new words and neologisms they considered to do better justice to the experience of the world than existing language. The distance between language and reality should be reduced according to van Deysse and his followers; this often led to the use of neologisms suggesting and effecting an absorption into language of the world itself, of its colours, of its materiality or, as the case might be, of its lightness and transitoriness. Literary writing became 'a painting with (new) words'.

It's not so easy to say why the movement of the 1880s opted for a track that was the exact opposite of symbolism. But part of the explanation certainly is that our national culture is painterly rather than literary: it privileges how we *see* and *experience* the world to what we may *say* about it. It is realist through and through. Furthermore, with the Dutch impressionism of the late 19th century (one only has to think of Van Gogh here), the painterly genius of the 17th century with its Rembrandts, Vermeers and Ruisdaels returned. It was

believed that impressionism did better justice to the experience of the world than realism, or, to use the right terminology, it was believed that impressionism could and should transmit a 'sensation' of actual reality. This, then, may explain why this literary movement of the 1880s (hence, '*de Tachtigers*') labelled itself as *sensitivism* ('*sensivitisme*' in Dutch).

Now, in his youth Huizinga was more interested in literature and language than in history (his doctoral dissertation was on a theme in Sanskrit literature) and he was deeply influenced by the movement of the 1880s. To a Dutchman this is immediately clear from the language Huizinga used in his *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, for it is written in the kind of sensitivist prose that was recommended by the sensitivist theoreticians of the movement of the 1880s. Unfortunately, the 'oddity' of Huizinga's prose is irrevocably lost when translated into a foreign language. This is why people outside the Netherlands necessarily remain unaware of one of the main features of Huizinga's classic.

Well, this long introduction finally gets me to my answer to your question. When writing *Sublime Historical Experience*, I considered the possibility of speaking of sublime historical 'sensation' rather than of sublime historical 'experience'. But the connotations and associations of the English word 'sensation' (think, for example, of the adjective 'sensational') would be wholly at odds with what Huizinga had in mind, so I would then have had to lengthily inform the book's readers about a Dutch literary tradition of which they were wholly unaware, with which they probably could not identify, and all this would undoubtedly have created more problems than it would have solved. So this is why I decided, in the end, to use the word 'experience' instead of 'sensation', while clearly explaining where the meaning of that term differed from its empiricist use. It's now some ten years later and I have had, since then, a few more experiences of how people reading things I wrote always interpret them against the grain.

So, perhaps it might have been better if I had used Huizinga's own term 'historical sensation' and explained its background after all, though, admittedly, this might have caused, in its turn, other new unforeseen and unforeseeable misunderstandings, for it seems to be my fate that my readers always want to read in my texts something much different from what is their clear and manifest intention.

Menezes

Well, perhaps you are not the only one to suffer that fate, at least not in Brazil. For example, the reception of Hayden White's work was (and still is) very negative there, especially among the more traditional historians, whether they be-

long to the category of the 'constructionists' (such as the adepts of *Annales*) or to that of the 'reconstructionists', to use Munslow's classification.⁴

Returning to your case, even though you had to deal with different issues and different aspects of them in your discussions with Zagorin, Iggers, Lorenz, Zammito, Bevir and Saari, I can discern in most of your responses an attempt to highlight the common ground between you and them, and to establish a more constructive debate, so to speak. Self-evidently, that was not the case with McCullagh and, more recently, with Icke or Roth. Anyway, my next question is: don't you think that the 'positive reception' of White's writings, and the arguably 'hostile' (or reckless) reception of your latest works, emerged mainly from the academic circles aligned with narrativism, postmodernism and so on, and less from other circles?

Ankersmit

I was surprised by your observation that the reception of White's work in Brazil has been 'very negative'. You say that this is how more traditional historians (either constructionist or reconstructionist) reacted to his work. Indeed, so much one would expect from practicing historians – who ordinarily have little interest in the philosophy and the theory of history (and they should certainly not be blamed for this, as I'd like to emphasize). But is what you say also true of Brazilian theorists (and philosophers) of history? Anyway, you are right when suggesting that there is difference between Hayden White's position and mine. White never had much interest in the question of what justifies historians when saying that one historical representation is better (or not) than some other, whereas that question is at stake in most of the things I wrote. Put differently, I have never had any doubts about the rationality of historical writing and about the historian's capacity to tell us the 'truth' about the past (however that notion of 'truth' had best be defined), whereas White preferred to focus on the nature of historical language exclusively and is thus (largely) indifferent to how it relates to the past itself.

You rephrase your question at the end somewhat differently. It's a difficult question you ask me here, and it goes without saying that my critics are probably in a better position to answer it than I am. Nevertheless, I myself have often pondered the question why the things I write almost invariably meet with so much aggression and hostility. My own explanation is, roughly, as follows. As you may know, I studied both history and philosophy. As a historian I'm convinced that what 19th century German historicist historians (Ranke,

4 See: Alun Munslow, *Deconstructing History*, 2nd Ed., (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 39–60.

Humboldt, Droysen and so on) have said about historical writing is basically correct, my only amendment being that what they say about the past itself should be read as claims about historical writing. On the other hand, my way of arguing is Anglo-Saxon – for that is the kind of philosophy I was taught and that I prefer because of its insistence on clear, precise and logical argument.

Now, historicist theorists have neither feeling nor knowledge of Anglo-Saxon analytical philosophy, but analytical Anglo-Saxon philosophers have neither feeling nor knowledge of historical writing, so what I'm saying makes no sense to both historicist theorists and Anglo-Saxon philosophers of language and science. A nice example of falling between two stools, I'd say.

Menezes

If you allow me, Frank, I should add that indeed your writing style is very clear and well argued, but, at the same time, it can be provocative and even polemic. Well, I don't take this as a problem (on the contrary, I find it fascinating), but this may be one of the reasons for it receiving so many reactions (positive or negative). By the way, what I told you about White can be applied mostly to professional historians, and less, of course, to historical theorists. However, the group of 'theorists' in Brazil is quite diverse: most are more acquainted with French theorists in general (like Michel Foucault, Michel de Certeau, Paul Ricœur, Paul Veyne, Pierre Bourdieu, Roger Chartier, etc.) than with American theorists (like Hayden White or Dominick LaCapra), so it is no surprise that there is no universally shared opinion about White in this country – although I should add that this is my particular view.

But now I would like to address another question. Speaking about Anglo-Saxon philosophers of language, it comes to my mind that one of your main interlocutors in *Sublime Historical Experience* was, naturally, Richard Rorty. I must confess that, just like you, I very much appreciate Rorty's philosophy, and I think he is one of the most provocative and original among those philosophers of language. It turns out that you based your argument against 'linguistic transcendentalism' (not only, but mostly) on Rorty's statement that 'language goes all the way down'.⁵ And it seems to me that at least part of your critique

5 He made that statement indirectly within the context of his discussion of Thomas Nagel's realism and his defence of the use of intuitions as a legitimate way of obtaining knowledge about the world, especially in his well-known essay 'What Is It Like to Be a Bat?'. The main question of his contention with Nagel on the state of intuitions was: 'can one ever appeal to nonlinguistic knowledge in philosophical argument?' That supposedly would put a realist like Nagel in front of a philosophical impasse: 'He might say either that *language does not go all the way down* – that there is a kind of awareness of facts which is not expressible

is applicable to Derrida's '*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*', too, since both (Rorty and Derrida) were equally responsible for putting us in this 'prisonhouse of language' (with which I can partly agree). However, while reading Rorty's writings – especially *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*⁶ and *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, and some other essays – I sensed that Rorty was aware that philosophy of language had, in fact, sometimes relapsed into metaphysics, doing with language the same that idealism has done with consciousness. Even more so, occasionally Rorty himself associates Nietzsche, Heidegger and even Derrida with transcendentalism, admitting that the ironist of one generation could be the metaphysician of the next (I am paraphrasing Rorty's argument).⁷ So, in those moments Rorty's pragmatism seems to avoid transcendentalism to the maximum, since he did not aim to elevate language to a superior position, but to expose its contingencies, questioning the vocabularies in use and making explicit its provisory nature. Don't you think that, following this argument, his nominalism has reserved a more modest role for language than the textualism of the Derrida of *Grammatology*, for example? This is my first question.

As to the second one, it also seems to me that you understand the expression 'all the way down' as if Rorty was saying that everything that exists only exists linguistically (or as a product of linguistic operations) – so language is all there is. Nevertheless, I read something that I found very useful in Calvin O. Schrag. In an interview he gave to Ramsey and Miller in the book *Experiences Between Philosophy and Communication*, Schrag was asked about how he gets rid of this kind of linguistic ambush (e.g., that language is all there is). He answered with a story by William James about the explanation of an Indian master to his apprentice that the world lies on the back of a huge elephant. The apprentice asked what gave support to the legs of the elephant, and the master said it was on the back of a huge turtle. The apprentice, still restless, wanted to know what was the base of support for the turtle's legs, and the master replied, 'turtles all the way down'. Then Schrag concluded (and I quote):

in language and which no argument could render dubious – or, more mildly, that there is a core language which is common to all traditions and which needs to be isolated'. Either way, according to Rorty, the claim that there is something *ineffable* 'which it is like to be us' is either deep or empty – although he clearly stayed with the second, which means that, for him, language *indeed* 'goes all the way down'. Richard Rorty, *The Consequences of Pragmatism*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), xxxv, xxxvi.

6 Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

7 Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 101.

Now I think, in a similar fashion, it can be said that interpretation goes all the way down. Language goes all the way down. Discourse goes all the way down. Action goes all the way down. But *that doesn't mean that any one of those items is all there is*. Here the task of philosophy becomes a continuing matter of sorting out, explicating, and clarifying the various expressions entwined in the upsurge of human life in the world: the linguistic expression and the action expression, the interpretive, the descriptive, the evaluative, and all the rest. So, I think that's how you surmount the so-called logical problem of appearing to assert that this is all there is.⁸

Therefore, the second question I would like to address is: Do you think that Rorty himself, consciously or unconsciously, has really fallen victim to this kind of linguistic ambush?

Ankersmit

You raise there the issue of Rorty's slogan, 'language goes all the way down'. Perhaps I'd best state right away that when commenting on Rorty's slogan I especially (if not exclusively) had in mind his tendency to totally subordinate experience to language. In his view, experience could never be or do anything more than what language permits it to be or to do. Now I would not wish to deny that in many cases (for example, in the sciences) we always find a close interaction between experience and language. But I consider it to be a dogmatic hyperbole to maintain that there should *always* be such an interaction. Counterexamples abound: think of animals like dogs and cats undoubtedly having experience without possessing the capacity of speech, or of children not yet having acquired that capacity. Or think of pain: it would be absurd to say that we cannot have the experience of pain if we lack the linguistic instruments for expressing it.

To believe there can be no experience where there is no language I consider one of those illnesses that philosophy has the tendency to fall prey to after its greatest successes. Surely, 20th century philosophy of language has been an unparalleled success-story in the history of Western philosophy; but inebriated by the triumphs of philosophy of language, its practitioners no longer hesitated to say things such as 'language goes all the way down' or '*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*', and this is going a step, or even many steps, too far.

8 Ramsey E. Ramsey and David J. Miller eds., *Experiences Between Philosophy and Communication: Engaging the Philosophical Contributions of Calvin O. Schrag*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 22.

As to the exact nature of the illness, my view would be that it is epistemological rather than ontological (or metaphysical). I mean, the closest parallel to it in the history of philosophy is Kantian transcendentalism; hence Kant's claim that the categories of understanding are the transcendental conditions of the possibility of knowledge. Replace what Kant had claimed for the categories of the understanding by language and you get Rorty's 'language goes all the way down'. So the irony is that Rorty, who in his *Philosophy as the Mirror of Nature* had set out as the uncompromising enemy of epistemology and transcendentalism, ended up being a staunch defender of linguistic transcendentalism. '*Quantum mutatus ab illo!*', one is inclined to say.

You most appropriately refer to Rorty's observation that the ironist of one generation may be the metaphysician of the next. Rorty had in mind here that you have two kinds of philosophers: on the one hand, you have the great builders or constructors in the history of Western philosophy, such as Kant, Hegel or Schopenhauer, and on the other, the destructors, or de-constructors, pulling down again all that had been built by the constructors. So one might say that Rorty followed the opposite route in his academic career: he began by being a destructor and ended up as a constructor, though with one important proviso. You correctly point out that Rorty was reluctant to make big claims about language. Characteristic is his habit of modelling language on 'conversation' – and that term surely is not suggestive of language's impressive capacity to discover great and eternal truths. But this does not alter the fact that even then, language is all we have and, hence, that we must hold on to the doctrine of 'language goes all the way down'. I mean, a modest conception of what language is able to achieve can go well together with the claim that 'language goes all the way down'.

Then to your story about these 'turtles going all the way down' and to which Schrag added: 'discourse goes all the way down. Action goes all the way down. But that doesn't mean that any one of those items is all there is'. This seems to me to lead to contradictions. Either you believe that language goes *all* (!) the way down; the implication then is that there could not be anything that is *outside* the reach of language. But that this should be so is explicitly denied in the last sentence of the quote. And then the first sentence is false. So I suppose this doesn't work.

Menezes

I think Schrag chose this rather paradoxical way of expressing himself because, in the end, for him it seems unlikely – even much more of an ironist like Rorty, who for me still is far from being dogmatic – that when someone says 'language goes all the way down' he is literally saying that 'language is all there

is', viz. that there is no (world) 'outside'.⁹ Self-evidently, you are just pointing out again, as you did in *Sublime Historical Experience*, that 'for Rorty experience and knowledge without language are just as impossible as the experience of noumenal reality was for Kant'.¹⁰ So when you say that in Rorty's linguistic philosophy there was no room left for experience, I suppose this is what must have disappointed you most in his philosophy and that this is why you choose the Aristotle of *De Anima* (and not Rorty) as one of your main guides towards historical experience. You make your point clear that you want to move beyond Rorty.

Nevertheless, I also found very interesting that, in a footnote, you recognized that (and here comes a long quote)

[o]ne needs to be a transcendentalist to speak about the 'sublimity' of experience. The anomalies we associate with the sublime are only such anomalies to the transcendentalist. No transcendentalism, no sublime – although what we call a 'sublime experience' is of course, itself, wholly indifferent to this fact about its dependence on transcendentalism. It exists whether we use this notion, or not. This may give an inkling of the problems of the writing of a book like this one: one needs the terminology of the (transcendentalist) tradition one wishes to overcome for an exposition of what should replace this tradition. It is as if the French revolutionaries of 1789 could only describe what was to be expected from their revolution in terms of the Ancien Régime world they so much wished to abolish.¹¹

Are you saying that one needs sublime experience to overcome linguistic transcendentalism, but when one needs to speak (or theorize) about 'the sublime',

9 In an essay called 'Texts and Lumps', Rorty explained that in a very clear statement: 'James and Dewey appreciated Kant's point that you can't compare your beliefs with something that isn't a belief to see if they correspond. But they sensibly pointed out that *that doesn't mean that there is nothing out there* to have beliefs about'. Hence, his point in admitting that there must be a reality 'out there' independent or external to any conscience we may have regarding it is not contrary to his belief (that Ankersmit sought to refute in the first chapter of *SHE*) that '*all that is needed* to make communication and persuasion, and thus knowledge, possible *is linguistic know-how* necessary to move from level to level'. Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth: Philosophical Papers, Volume 1*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 83, 88, emphasis mine.

10 Frank Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 14.

11 Ankersmit, *Sublime*, 428n.

one must play again the transcendentalist's game? This is one question, to which I want to add another one.

I remember Hans Gumbrecht saying in his *Production of Presence* – after showing us what we can get if we move beyond meaning to what he calls presence – that we are not allowed (or prepared, *for sheer lack of appropriate concepts*) 'to enter an intellectual world of postmetaphysical epistemology – and this explains why it matters to know at least what exactly we left behind ourselves. *Derrida was right: overcoming metaphysics is certainly an uphill struggle*'.¹² Besides, while reading his book one may have the impression that he wants to move to the other side of the river (towards *presence* and aesthetic experience) without burning his boats (i.e., without leaving meaning and epistemology behind). But, now getting to the question: Do you think that historical experience might be the best candidate to finally give us the passport to enter into a 'postmetaphysical world'?

Ankersmit

Let me begin with your question about Rorty and Aristotle. You're right when saying that I was a bit disappointed by the Rorty of after *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. I admired in this book Rorty's attack on epistemology – mainly because I saw in it a parallel to what I had been doing myself in my book on narrative logic when rejecting what I had referred to there as 'translation rules'.¹³ It seems fairly natural to consider the translation rules as the historian's analogue to epistemological rules making knowledge possible. I knew I had taken a certain risk when rejecting these translation rules (since this seemed to cut through all ties between the past and what the historian says about it), so when Rorty condemned epistemology to the dustbin I thought, 'well, at least I'm not the only one to make such a hazardous move'. Moreover, Rorty did not infer any dramatic consequences from his move for the reliability of our knowledge we have of the world. So that made me confident that I had done nothing unduly irresponsible when dropping these translation rules.

Nevertheless, the question remains how to distinguish truth from falsehood. I had dealt with that issue, for history, in the last chapter of the book on narrative logic. And in his last chapter Rorty also seemed to be eager to address that question after having done away with epistemology. As you may recall,

12 Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 91.

13 Frank Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic: The Semantics of Historian's Language*, (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1983), 80–87.

in that last chapter he offered a somewhat lukewarm argument to the effect that something of value might be found in Gadamer's hermeneutics. But he was not very specific about what this should be. And like many other readers of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* I simply assumed that Rorty was now going to think this over and that we'd best await his next book. Put differently, I had believed that *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* should be regarded as a preliminary clearing the way for something truly 'big' that would set philosophy on a wholly new course.

So I waited and waited, but nothing came. It is true, there was this collection *The Consequences of Pragmatism*, and if you were in a generous mood, you could say it gave an idea of what directions he was apparently thinking in (namely, pragmatism – something to which I have never been able to warm up, for that matter). But then, after some ten years, there finally was Rorty's so eagerly awaited new book, *Irony, Contingency and Solidarity*. Well, I can tell you that I have never been so disappointed in all of my life! I found absolutely nothing of any substance in the book: it seemed to me just some vague, idle talk without any programme or guide for the future. Things got even worse when Rorty began to pal up with French thinkers such as Derrida, Lyotard and so on, whose work I always regarded as making a point of being pointless.

So I had the feeling I was now left to my own devices, since no help was to be expected from Rorty anymore. Having arrived at this stage I should say that I have always had much sympathy for aesthetics. As you will know, the term 'aesthetics' originally refers to our sensory perception of the world. This is still how Kant used the term in his notion of the 'transcendental aesthetics' in his first *Critique*. Similarly, for me, aesthetics is not necessarily, not even primarily, to be associated with art and/or fiction. On the contrary, *aisthèsis* is, for me, the most direct and immediate contact we can have with the world, and this *aisthèsis* may get us closer to the world than even the simplest true statement. Recognizing the truth of a statement such as 'the sky is blue' is, in fact, a complex process, combining an experience with the application of the, in this case, appropriate words – such as 'sky' and 'blue'. Whereas the *aisthèsis* of the wood through which I'm walking is direct and immediate – and just as overwhelming. In this sense *aisthèsis* is, for me, the very model of truth – and of which the truth of the statement is an only faint reflection.

This may explain why I tended to fall back on aesthetics when Rorty had left me in the cold. And it may be that being a Dutchman is part of the explanation of my fascination with *aisthèsis*. Recall my answer to your first question. Whereas doubts about realism and naturalism stimulated the abstraction of symbolism in 19th century France, the Dutch reaction – sensitivism – went

in exactly the opposite direction. Sensitivism found truth not in abstraction and the endless play of language (culminating a century later in the work of Derrida), but in *aisthèsis* and aesthetics.

And this brings me to Aristotle. What so much fascinated me in the Aristotle of *De Anima* is that he did not (as almost everybody does) regard seeing as the highest of our sensory capacities, but, on the contrary, (what most people would regard precisely as the humblest one) the sense of touch. And his argument was that whereas seeing always keeps its distance from what it sees – and in this way always remains aloof from the world in which we live – the sense of touch is not afraid of making dirty fingers in the most literal sense of the word: it gives you a direct and immediate contact with the world; it takes the form of the world itself; it forms itself after the world and imposes no forms of its own on it. And it is precisely because of this that the sense of touch gets us closer to the world than any other of the senses. And that is why the sense of touch carries the Grail of Truth.

Then, to your question about the sublime and transcendentalism. It is, roughly, as follows. Kantian transcendentalism is an explanation of how experience is possible. Hence, to the extent we are willing to go along with Kant, we will be informed about what the limits of experience are, of what experience can and cannot be. So exactly this is the distinction implied by Kantian transcendentalism: it tells you what experience can and could not possibly be. Now, the funny thing is – and I leave aside the details here – that the third *Critique* mentions the possibility of a kind of experience, sublime experience, that would in the strict sense of the word seem to be ruled out by the transcendentalism of the first *Critique*. Self-evidently, this places sublime experience in a category quite separate from the more ‘normal’ and mundane kind of experience (as studied in the first *Critique*). And in this way one can say that one needs transcendentalism in order to grasp the unique properties of sublime experience.

Menezes

Still on transcendentalism, in *History and Tropology* you clearly stated that the book’s story would be ‘the story of how to move from a metaphorical, transcendentalist concept of history to the Aristotelian–Freudian conception of historical writing’.¹⁴ And it is perfectly clear that you were on the move from metaphor or language towards experience – in which you did not abandon language at all, but from then on language would not be the primary (or the only) source

14 Frank Ankersmit, *History and Tropology: The Rise and Fall of Metaphor*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 28.

for historical writing, leaving that position to historical experience. Then, you explained in the introduction that, when it comes to the Freudian approach, you were thinking about his note on ‘the Mystic Writing Pad’, but your exploration of that was sketchy. I realized that in *Sublime Historical Experience* you returned to Aristotle rather than to Freud for the defense of your theory of experience. Could you describe what you had in mind when you labelled this kind of historical writing, based on experience, as ‘Aristotelian-Freudian’?

Ankersmit

When answering your previous question, I distinguished between two of our senses: the sense of sight and that of touch. Now, the basic idea here is that the functioning of our minds, our psychologies, had better be modelled on the sense of touch than on that of sight. This is, at least, the message Freud wanted to convey with his metaphor of the mystic writing pad. Our life experiences are inscribed on us, not in the form of memories or historical facts that are in some way external to ourselves, but they are inscribed on our psychological skin like scars and tattoos, and we shall carry them with us for the rest of our lives. Memories and histories one may forget since they are not part of yourself. But an experience in the real sense of the word, I would almost say, a sublime experience, is inscribed on your soul and you will never be able to forget it for as long as you live. It has become part of yourself. Clearly, such an inscription requires you to be ‘touched’ by what effects the inscription. So here you have the link between Freud and Aristotle’s speculations about the sense of touch.

Menezes

Remaining with Aristotle, at least in two occasions¹⁵ you also stated that with-in this conception of knowledge and experience associated with the sense of *touch* instead of the sense of *sight* (in which subject and object are in a dynamic *interaction*), first, you have experience, and next, you have the subject who is formed by experience. At that moment of ‘suspension’ you have the *experience only*, while subject and object are merely its ‘obedient shadows’. Then you went to Huizinga again and proposed a clear distinction between ‘historical insight’ – the historian *giving form* to the past – and ‘historical experience’, in which ‘the historian’s mind is *formed by the past*’.¹⁶

But then one may still ask: ‘How is the historian’s mind *formed by the past*? How can someone *know* the past in that way?’. And it seems that someone with this kind of questions in mind will never be totally satisfied with any further

15 Ankersmit, *Sublime*, 19, 249.

16 Ankersmit, *Sublime*, 128, emphasis mine.

explanation you can give on historical experience since he might be possessed by the ‘desire of knowledge’; and you, on the other hand, as someone possessed by the ‘desire of being’, will never be able to (and neither will wish to), as you said in *SHE*, bridge ‘the gap between being and knowledge’, or the one between experience and language.¹⁷ Do you think that this might be a common shortcoming in some of the assessments that your book received – someone’s refusal to understand it and to approach it in its own terms?

Ankersmit

I should start by saying that I find the phrase ‘the historian’s mind is formed by the past’ wholly unproblematic – as far as its meaning is concerned. That is to say, perhaps one may believe that historians are not ‘formed’ by the past and that they write their books and articles in historical vacuum. However, it’s a fact too obvious to be stated that, e.g., a 17th century historian is the product of a past much different from that of a 19th century historian, and next, that this difference will not fail to announce itself in how both of them write about their respective pasts.

Now, suppose you visit Auschwitz and what still is to be found there of the barracks and of the gas chambers. It is true that the Holocaust is a past of more than seventy years ago, but it is anything but ‘an “inert and vanished past”’ devoid of ‘vital agency’ and incapable of transmitting certain ‘moods and feelings into the mind of an (...) historian in the present’. There must surely be something seriously wrong with anyone – historian or no historian – who will not be disgusted by the confrontation with this terrible part of the past. Similarly, it will provoke certain ‘moods and feelings’, as I can confirm from my own experience. I visited Auschwitz some twenty years ago at the occasion of a conference in Krakow. We went there with a bus, and when driving back I was so sick by what I had seen that I actually vomited in the bus. Of course, the reaction is a bit extreme, but it is well-known enough that many people had similar ones. Think, furthermore, of all the contemporary discussion of moments and the ‘*lieux de mémoire*’, all of them having the common denominator that the past may, under certain circumstances, act on us quite powerfully.

Lastly, and most importantly, since the emergence of historicism two and a half centuries ago it is universally accepted as a wholly uncontroversial truth in Western civilization that we are a product of the past and that, in this way, the past persists and continues to act in us. I mention just one example taken from yesterday’s newspaper. As you may know some anti-Brexiters started a lawsuit and demanded that the British Parliament should also pronounce on

¹⁷ Ankersmit, *Sublime*, 329.

the Brexit. The Court agreed with the anti-Brexiteers and when doing so referred to the so-called 'Case of Proclamations' of 1610, stating that the King has no other prerogatives than granted to him by the law. So it is not unthinkable that this act of some 400 years ago will prevent Theresa May from pressing through the 'hard Brexit' she and her government presently have in mind. Of course, an infinity of other examples can be given of how the past can function as a causal factor in the present, and, indeed, historical causation is more complicated than that.

Menezes

Let me ask you another question very much related to the example of your visit to Auschwitz some 20 years ago. In *SHE* you are very clear that historical experience is an experience without a subject or an object of experience. Nonetheless, one might be mystified in understanding how *our own* moods and feelings could not interfere in this process. So, the question is: is it possible to (practically, not theoretically) differentiate the moods and feelings coming from the remnant past – which, you use to say, 'have us' – from the moods and feelings you may have by visiting the gas chambers, the barracks and by actually seeing and touching that so tragic place? (The sickness *you felt* might be a good example of what I have in mind here.)

Ankersmit

What I had told you about my own experience of Auschwitz was meant as a reaction to the question of how it is possible that the past can be an influence on the present, 'form' the present, or whatever formulation one would prefer here. Well, that such a thing is possible is a wholly uncontroversial truth that nobody in his right senses will wish to doubt, and it was this truth I wished to illustrate with this anecdote of my visit to Auschwitz. But, as such, it has nothing to do with sublime historical experience, as discussed in the book with that title.

What I see as the basic feature of sublime historical experience is, perhaps, best expressed in the snowball metaphor I used when discussing Benjamin¹⁸ and in the book of 2012.¹⁹ Here the idea is the transition from a phase of an eternal present into a past, present and future. Hence, with how the past *as such* comes into being, and why there is a past as an object of potential historical research *at all*. And then you have, indeed, this transition from a phase in which there is no subject (present) and past (object) to one in which both have come into being. Sublime historical experience is, basically, the experience of

18 Ankersmit, *Sublime*, 186–187.

19 Ankersmit, *Meaning*, 179–183.

that transition. Hence, this also is where one should locate these 'moods and feelings', as discussed in SHE, for the 'moods and feelings' I had in mind there (with Bollnow and Strasser) transcend the subject-object division. And this is where they differ from the kind of emotions we will feel, for example, when being confronted with a horrible past, as in the case of a visit to Auschwitz. Then you have an object (what's left of the KZ Auschwitz) and the subject (having certain emotions when walking around the former KZ).

And there is one more aspect of sublime historical experience where it basically differs from the more mundane phenomenon of our being 'formed' by the past that one may find so very difficult to grasp. 'Normally' our being formed by the past is a most complex affair in the sense that it is the result of a myriad of influences exerted on us by the past. The average well-educated, contemporary human being is 'formed' by his family, the surroundings in which he grew up, his social class, his national past, the past of the civilization of which his nation is a part, that nation's and that civilization's triumphs and defeats, the history of his religion (if he has one) and so on. And all these different influences from the past are mixed together in his mind and personality in a most complex way, with the result that all these influences lose their own contours in the *pot pourri* that is the human mind. You cannot disentangle in your mind what you owe to your religion and its past, to the past of your nation, to your social class, to your family, and so on. It's all 'one big soup', if I'm allowed to express it so disrespectfully. Even the most sustained psychoanalysis, lasting for years and years, perhaps for all of your life, will not enable you to separate all these threads from each other so that you can retrace each of them to their proper origin in the past.

Now, this is essentially different with sublime historical experience. I call to mind here my argument that historical experience always goes together with a de-contextualization on both the subject and the object-side. The past is then reduced – to return to the prototypical example of Huizinga's historical experience as discussed in my book – to the paintings by the Flemish primitives he saw at this exhibition in Bruges in 1902, whereas he himself (as a historical subject) was reduced to the experience of these paintings only. He was overwhelmed by them, and could only be so, since nothing stood in the way of, or disturbed his direct contact with these paintings. The past of late Medieval Northwestern Europe literally stood face to face here with the historian – with Huizinga – undisturbed or unaffected by anything else. Because of this de-contextualization on the object-side, the past, as exemplified by the paintings of the Flemish primitives, could press its form on the historian's mind. And because of the simultaneous de-contextualization on the side of the subject,

the historian's mind, i.e., Huizinga's mind, was maximally open to this being 'formed' by an, in this case, quite specific part of the past. This, then, is where the situation of sublime historical experience differs from how we 'normally' relate to the past.

In the book on sublime historical experience I argued that trauma is the psychological counterpart of what sublime experience is in philosophy. And, indeed, trauma offers a roughly similar picture. The traumatic experience is caused by an event so terrible, and so horrible, that it obscures everything else. It is, in this sense, a de-contextualized event. This is the object-side of traumatic experience. The subject-side consists in that the subject of the experience is wholly absorbed by it – he or she sees only *it*. And this is also how it is taken up in their mind, personality or psychology. That is to say, the traumatic experience remains a wholly de-contextualized component in the traumatized person's memory. It remains unrelated to other such components, even to the extent that the traumatized person may completely forget about the traumatic experience (as you ordinarily forget your dreams, since you cannot contextually connect them to anything in your waking-life), so that it manifests its existence only in that person's dreams or in his or her psycho-pathology. The psycho-analytical cure of trauma consists, therefore, of two things. In the first place, the traumatic experience will have to be dug up again, in case it has been repressed, and in the second place, it will then have to be given a place in the traumatized person's life-history. Only by contextualization can the trauma lose its sting. Hence, the power the traumatic experience had over the traumatized person can be weakened, or even dissolved, by contextualization, by telling a story or a history in which the traumatic experience may find its more or less logical place.

Let's return, with this in mind, to sublime historical experience. It will be clear that the contextualization of traumatic experience must be distinguished from the experience itself. To be sure, the psycho-analytical cure of the trauma may contain an element of re-enactment of the traumatic experience, but when thus making it present again, this serves no other purpose than that of neutralizing it by contextualization and narrativization. In this sense, the latter is the very opposite of the former. This, then, marks the unbridgeable gap between the traumatic experience, on the one hand, and what is said about it in terms of narrative language, on the other, at some later stage – 'unbridgeable', not in the sense that one could not get from the former to the latter (for making this move is precisely the whole purpose of 'the talking cure'), but in the sense that after the move has been achieved, the former no longer is what it essentially was before. Where once was wordless experience and pain, now

is language, and both of them exclude each other. This, then, is what I had in mind when saying that sublime historical experience is 'ineffable'. As soon as you succeed in speaking about it, it has ceased to exist and been transformed into something fundamentally different.

While the purpose of 'the talking cure' is to free the traumatized person from the spell of the traumatic experience, putting historical experience into words serves its purposes as well, for what the past reveals of itself in sublime historical experience may deepen our insight into the past. However, it is not as such an insight (or knowledge) itself. This is why I always denied any cognitive content to sublime historical experience, but it may occasion, stimulate or give rise to historical knowledge. Somewhere in the book I compared sublime historical experience to a gunshot: it may make you look in a certain direction, as the hearing of a gunshot does, but what you will actually see there is a wholly different affair. Perhaps you will find there nothing of interest, but it may also be that you will find pure 'historical gold', as was the case with Huizinga.

Menezes

You once told me that you have used the opportunity of releasing a Dutch version of SHE, *De sublieme historische ervaring*, which came out in 2007, to (using your words in an email from February 2014) 'correct a whole lot of weaknesses, shortcomings, and errors' in the English version. So, especially for those who do not have Dutch language skills to check for themselves, what are the main changes one is supposed to find in the Dutch book compared to the English one?

Ankersmit

Yes, there have been many changes, some of them of only minor importance, but in other cases a whole chapter was re-written. That was the case, above all, with the first chapter dealing with what I had called there contemporary 'linguistic transcendentalism'. We discussed this issue already: the idea then was that the linguistic transcendentalism of contemporary philosophy of language robs experience of its autonomy. As we saw, according to Rorty's slogan 'language goes all the way down', experience can only enter the scene if accompanied by language; it can therefore never be more than the obedient slave of language and only what language permits it to be. Now, in the original English version of that chapter I said much about language (and Quine, Davidson and Rorty) but relatively little about experience, so in the Dutch version I restored the balance.

As I said before, I read Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* after the completion of my book on narrative logic and then believed there to be a parallel between his attack on epistemology, on the one hand, and my own argu-

ment against the belief that there should be certain ‘translation rules’ relating the represented past of the past to its historical representation, on the other. With regard to these ‘projection rules’ you could think of, for example, the projection rules applied by mapmakers when making maps of part of the earth’s surface. Now, Rorty often liked to phrase his attack on epistemology by saying that it had the ambition of presenting certain ‘*tertia*’ (i.e., ‘third things’), underlying two other things, namely both reality and our knowledge of it, permitting us to move, without error, from the one to the other. And he then always went on to argue that the belief that there should be such ‘*tertia*’ is an illusion: we have only reality and knowledge – which is also all we need, for that matter – and there is not one more ‘third’ thing to be located between the two of them, allegedly guiding us in our effort to move from the one to the other. Clearly, that was in agreement with my argument in the book on narrative logic and why there is a whole lot of Rorty in the things I wrote since then.

Now, this became different with the book on sublime historical experience. The argument there, basically, is that there *is* something between reality and knowledge, namely *experience*. I was well aware that, just as with the Leibnizianism of the book on narrative logic, this apology of experience was in conflict with common wisdom – not only that of our own time, but even of the last few centuries. Think of the statement by Sir Robert Boyle (1627–1691): ‘experience is but an assistant to reason, since it doth indeed supply information to the understanding, but the understanding still remains the judge, and has the power or right to examine and make use of the testimonies that are presented to it.’²⁰ Kant is, of course, the paradigmatic example here. Think of his famous ‘thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind’. The idea is that we can only have ‘experience’ if experience is guided by concepts or, as the case may be, by the categories of understanding. Hence, there is nothing between the subject and the object of knowledge. As Schopenhauer put it, ‘both [i.e., subject and object (F.A.)] mutually limit each other: where the object begins, the subject ceases to be.’²¹ Seeing things this way is inevitable if you are doing epistemology, since it has to indissolubly tie knowledge and reality together – and it will immediately be clear that any claims the epistemologist might make, will be fatally distorted, or worse still, if there *is* something between subject and language. Put differently, within the matrix of epistemology, leaving no room for anything between subject and object, experience is necessarily crushed between the two of them. In sum, the

20 R. Boyle, *The Works of the Honorable Robert Boyle, Vol. 5*, (London: J. and F. Rivington, 1672), 171.

21 A. Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung (I)*, in *id.*, *Sämtliche Werke, Vol. 1*, (Wiesbaden: 1971), 6.

history of philosophy is, as any other history, a history of the victors and the vanquished – and one where concepts like truth, reason and reality belong to the category of the victors. Experience, on the other hand, has no titles of nobility: it belongs to the most ‘proletarian’ of philosophical concepts; it is the prototypical ‘loser’; it shares this status with other notions marginalized by philosophy such as ‘authenticity’, ‘feeling’, ‘emotion’, ‘desire’, ‘*Sehnsucht*’, all of them not coincidentally having their roots in Romanticism.

This results in the following dilemma: either you agree with the epistemologist – but then experience will have to be cut down in the empiricist conception of experience where experience has lost all of its autonomy with regard to language and knowledge – or you reject epistemology – and then there is, in principle, room for a kind of experience having an autonomy of its own and to comprise more than the empiricist is willing to grant it.

Having argued against epistemology, Rorty opted for the second possibility. But much to my regret, he did not use the opening thus created between subject (language, knowledge) and object (reality, the world) by upgrading the always so sorry status of (aesthetic) experience. His own position was, basically, that we should not oppose subject and object as is typically done in the epistemological tradition. According to him we should not think of the relationship between the subject (knowledge) and the object (the world) as two parallel planes, as is typically done in epistemology, but rather as a continuous interaction between bits of subject (knowledge and language) and bits of the world. Furthermore, the former belongs no less to the world than the latter, for knowledge and language are no less instruments for ‘coping (a word Rorty always liked for expressing his pragmatist gut-feelings) with the world’ than the instruments the physicist may construct for achieving that knowledge. The locus of that interaction is, of course, science itself, with the result that anyone asking ‘philosophical’ questions about knowledge and language will be referred by Rorty to the practice of science. This is where Rorty agrees with the pragmatist and with Quine’s ‘naturalized epistemology’.

In opposition to Rorty, I would opt for the other horn of the dilemma after having dissolved the ties binding the subject and the object together: viz. for emancipating (aesthetic) experience from its being tied to the matrix of the empiricist. Clearly, this must result in a conception of experience having an autonomy of its own regarding both the subject and the object. And this is not such an absurd move, as may seem to be the case at first sight. Think of color. With regard to color we can do either of two things: we can ask with Newton²²

22 See: Isaac Newton; Alan E. Shapiro, ed., *The Optical Papers of Isaac Newton, Vol I: The Optical Lectures, 1670–1672*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

the question what color *is* (answer: light possessing a certain wave-length), and next, with the Goethe of the *Farbenlehre* the wholly different question of how we *experience* color.²³ Newton does the former – and remains within the empiricist matrix. Goethe, however, does the latter and then goes on to argue that words and language will always fail here and that we then have no other option than to try to capture the experience of color as well as we can by means of mutually excluding color-words (such as blue and red or yellow) without ever succeeding in doing complete justice to the experience of color. In this way color breaks through the matrix of epistemology and its claim to be able to fix the relationship between words and things.

Goethe's intuitions can be supported by the phenomenon of color anomia (there exist people capable of distinguishing between colors no less adequately than people not suffering from color anomia, but who nevertheless fail to attach the 'right' word to the experience of a certain color).²⁴ Matching language with experience here is always a matter of trial and error, thus granting to experience a priority to language denied to it in epistemology. Language always hurries here pantingly and breathlessly after experience without ever succeeding in catching up with it.

Pain is another good example: indeed, we can describe it with the help of always inadequate metaphors such as a 'sharp pain', a 'dull pain', a 'stabbing pain', and so on. But such descriptions are always tentative and never completely perform the job expected from them. And pain is a good example for one more reason. Normally, there still is a subject, or person, who perceives a certain color or who is in pain, even though an 'openness' has come into being at the object-side that no epistemology could live with. But even the subject (of experience) might evaporate and be subsumed in the experience. In the case of color one might think of the huge canvases by Barnett-Newman – not coincidentally associated by the painter himself with the sublime – having on certain spectators the effect of being 'sucked' into the painting's vast color fields. Similarly, pain may become so intense that there is only the pain: the subject of pain has then been taken up in the experience of pain. So, in both cases there is an experience without there being an object and a subject of the experience in question, though one may still hold that there must be 'something' having effected this fusion of subject and object of experience in the experience.

23 See: Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Theory of Colours*, (Cambridge and London: The M.I.T. Press, 1840).

24 Frank Ankersmit, *Meaning, Truth and Reference in Historical Representation*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 2012), 206–213.

This, then, may illustrate what I had in mind with sublime historical experience. Let me explain. We will all recall the first pages of Nietzsche's *On the Use and Abuse of History* (1874) and where he has this so thought-provoking image of these grazing and ruminating herds living in a quasi-eternal present.²⁵ Humanity must once have been like this. But then, at some fateful moment, perhaps because of some cataclysmic event to be told from one generation to the other, mankind divided this eternal present (subject) into a past (object) and a future. At that moment, the past was cut off from the present and something we had now lost forever. And the loss is no small thing, for that matter! For it was the loss of the better part of what humanity had been up till then. Is our past not always a much 'bigger' thing than the present? Therefore, all ancient myths about the origins of mankind are stories of the loss of a former paradise, of a phase in which we were, or lived together with the gods. Anyway, this birth-trauma of humanity gave us an objective past – the past as a potential object of historical research. Historicity had now come into being, and historical writing was since then possible and would remain a most important and even indispensable concern in human society ever since. History undoubtedly is the queen of the human sciences. Let's be proud of our discipline!

Sublime historical experience is, basically, the experience of this breaking up of an eternal present into a past, present and future. It may present itself on three levels. In the first place on the mythic level that I mentioned just now. In the second place on the level of a collectivity, such as a culture, civilization or of a nation, if what that collectivity had always regarded as self-evident and immune to the vagaries of history suddenly reveals itself to have been just one more historical contingency – think of the French, or the Russian Revolution and of similar huge historical upheavals. Thirdly, it may take place in the so much narrower and intimate sphere of the individual historian. Paradigmatic, then, is the moment when an individual historian comes to realise that what formerly was believed to be ahistorical – a part of unchanging human nature, so to say – and to be devoid of historical interest, has its history as well. A permanent present is then broken up into a past and a present, too, though admittedly at a very restricted area of human existence. A new historical sub-discipline has then come into being, such as the history of gender or of the child. This is the kind of historical experience (or sensation) Huizinga had in mind when describing the effect that an old engraving, a song or a document sometimes had on him. And one can think of mixtures of the second and the third type of historical experience. Here we must think again of Huizinga's visit to the exhibition of the Flemish Primitives in Bruges in 1902. But in all

25 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History*, (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2005), 5–7.

these cases we move back to a stage where subject (the present) and object (the past) had not yet been separated. Historical experience is the experience of this separation and it is always colored by certain ‘moods and feelings’. And I fully endorse here the views of Bollnow and Strasser that ‘moods and feelings’ may sometimes be ‘larger’ than ourselves, in the sense that they ‘have us’ instead of us having them. Just like the historical experience as discussed here, they transcend the subject/object opposition and, hence, any effort to cram them into some epistemological scheme or other.

Finally, the distinction between the three kinds of historical experience that I briefly sketched just now was one of the new elements I introduced at the end of the Dutch version. I developed and refined it further – while also lengthily addressing the issue of nostalgia – in *Meaning, Truth and Reference* of 2012.

Menezes

As you yourself have declared, you have been an adherent of the German historicist tradition (founded by Ranke) all the way down your intellectual career, in which you aimed to take historical writing as it is, never advocating any revolutionary changes in how history is written and in how we relate to the past. Hence, it seems to me that in *Sublime Historical Experience* there is a reminiscence of historicism in questions like ‘what makes us aware of the past at all?’ or ‘how do we relate to our past?’. At the same time, in the book’s epilogue, while you sought to present ‘the nature of sublime historical experience’ by relating it to two different books, one of Rousseau and the other of Hölderlin, you said that this implies that your enterprise can be seen as both a return to an ‘antedated’ historicism and as ‘a moving beyond’ historicism.²⁶

It turns out that in Chapter 4, while speaking about Burckhardt, you called Ranke’s exclamation that he wished to ‘efface’ himself and let ‘the powerful forces of the past’ speak for themselves ‘pathetic’. You also said that Ranke was by no means a ‘narrow-minded philistine’, but he never informed us about ‘his having had a historical experience’.²⁷ I mean, both seem to be reasonable critiques, even more if we consider your remarkable claim that, ‘as a historian, you should make use of all your personality when writing history and not allow

26 Ankersmit, *Sublime*, 329. Although in that book the term ‘historicism’ prevailed in order to differentiate the historicism of the German tradition from Popper’s type of historicism in his book *The Poverty of Historicism*, referring back then to speculative philosophies of history. This, of course, changed in *Meaning, Truth and Reference in Historical Representation*, where ‘historicism’ (for referring to German tradition) was put back in the game.

27 Ankersmit, *Sublime*, 165, 170.

any part of it to be sacrificed on the altar of some misguided scientific delusion. “*L’histoire se fait avec des documents*” – indeed, but *also* with historians.’²⁸

Then, your last book’s basic assumption – that you reiterated a moment ago – was that ‘the historicist account of historical writing, here associated primarily with the writings of Leopold von Ranke and Wilhelm von Humboldt, is basically correct’, and you wanted to translate historicism ‘into more contemporary terms.’²⁹ Then, a considerable part of that book was dedicated to historical experience, which makes one wonder if you are actually proposing a way of reconciling historicism and historical experience, but that is not very clear in the book itself. In light of this discussion, what are your present thoughts on this relationship between historicism and historical experience?

Ankersmit

I fully agree with Maurice Mandelbaum’s definition of historicism which goes as follows: ‘historicism is the belief that an adequate understanding of the nature of any phenomenon and an adequate assessment of its value are to be gained through considering it in terms of the place it occupied and the role it played within a process of development.’³⁰ Put differently, everything should be regarded as the result of its history, or, to say it more succinctly, everything is what it has become.’³¹ Moreover, I unconditionally endorse historicism if described in this way, and you’re right when saying that many of my writings on the philosophy of history were an attempt to give to 19th century historicism a form that would satisfy the standards of contemporary philosophy of language.

But it is not immediately clear how historicism, thus defined, would apply to the idea of historical experience. One could argue in favor of the view that the former leaves room for the latter, but also against it. With regard to the first

28 Ankersmit, *Sublime*, 191.

29 Ankersmit, *Meaning*, 1.

30 M. Mandelbaum, *History, Man, & Reason*, (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971), 42.

31 Think of Herder: ‘what I am, I have become. I grew like a tree, the germ was there; but the air, the soil and all the elements I gathered around me, all of them had to contribute to the form, the germ, the fruit and the tree’. See: J.G. Herder, “Vom Erkennen und Empfinden der menschlichen Seele”, in B. Suphan and C. Redlich, eds., *Sämtliche Werke. 33 Bände. Band VIII*, (Berlin, 1877), 307 (my translation). Or think of Ranke: ‘in all things, in all times, it is the origin that is decisive. The first germ often is effective in all of a thing’s development, either consciously or unconsciously’. See L. von Ranke, *Historisch-politische Zeitschrift*, in id., *Sämtliche Werke. 54 Bände. Band I*, (Leipzig, 1867), 345 (my translation). And, finally, Dilthey: ‘what a human being is, only his history can tell him’. See: W. Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften. Band VIII*, (Stuttgart, 1957), 226 (my translation).

option, it could be argued that since the past is my past, the past from which I emerged, I must have a unique and privileged access to it, just as no one could have my memories. And this privileged access to one's past clearly comes close to what was said above about historical experience. But the other option is possible as well, for it could also be pointed out that everyone lives in the present and is, for this reason, *eo ipso* excluded from having a direct and immediate access to the past, even if this past happens to be one's 'own' past (understood as either our collective or as our individual past). This is, basically, the reaction to be expected from anyone having heard for the first time about the notion of historical experience.

It follows, if I'm not mistaken, that no categorical and final claims can be made about the relationship between historicism and historical experience. It need not surprise, therefore, that some historicist historians, such as Burckhardt and Huizinga, were open to the idea of historical experience, whereas others, such as Ranke, apparently were not. That is, perhaps we may infer that Ranke would have rejected historical experience from the fact that he never raised the issue in his numerous writings; on the other hand, it is admittedly true that Ranke asked the impossible of the historian when demanding with all the considerable rhetorical power available to him that he should 'wipe himself out'. Nevertheless, the very idea of the historian 'wiping himself out' – so that only the past itself can speak through his mouth – is not that far removed from the direct and immediate contact with the past promised by historical experience. So, perhaps Ranke was not so hostile to historical experience after all. To sum up, I don't think there exists a necessary link between historicism and the notion of historical experience; nevertheless, historicists are probably more amenable to the notion than philosophers of history of other denominations.